

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 597

CE 083 048

AUTHOR Dinsdale, Julia
TITLE Community Voice: Focus Group Research with Adult Learners in Worcestershire and Herefordshire.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 24p.; Second "Community Voice" produced as part of the Collaborative Widening Participation Project (University College Worcester, Coventry University, and Warwick University). Funded by Worcestershire and Herefordshire Lifelong Learning Partnerships.
AVAILABLE FROM University College Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, Tel: 01905 855554; e-mail j.dinsdale@worc.ac.uk. For full text: <http://www.worc.ac.uk/wp>.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Adult Education; Adult Educators; *Adult Students; Community Education; *Course Selection (Students); Day Care; *Delivery Systems; Educational Attitudes; Educational Counseling; *Educational Needs; Educational Opportunities; Educational Policy; *Enrollment Influences; Financial Support; Focus Groups; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; Influences; *Lifelong Learning; Participation; Policy Formation; Publicity; Relevance (Education); School Holding Power; Student Attitudes; Student Educational Objectives; Student Needs; Student Recruitment; Transportation; Tutors
IDENTIFIERS Educational Marketing; *England

ABSTRACT

Focus groups of adult learners and some nonlearners in the English counties of Worcestershire and Herefordshire were convened to gather information about local adults' attitudes toward and experiences of further education courses. The focus groups examined how people hear about courses, why they join courses, what factors prevent people from completing courses, and why people choose to keep attending a course and enroll in additional courses. The findings were synthesized into conclusions and recommendations intended to help policymakers and practitioners attract more learners to adult courses and enable more people to complete courses successfully. The following were among the key findings and recommendations: (1) because most people hear about courses through word of mouth, engaging with community and workplace networks and supporting people in such networks with realistic, up-to-date information is important; (2) taster events are a useful way of publicizing courses; (3) guidance must become an integral part of the publicity procedure; (4) courses must be tailored to suit diverse needs; (5) holding courses locally is key to attracting learners; (6) learners would welcome workplace learning and leisure courses; (7) transportation, child care, and low course fees are key to course enrollment and completion; and (8) courses on all levels of education are needed at the local level. (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

Community Voice

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Dinsdale

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Focus Group Research with Adult Learners
in Worcestershire and Herefordshire

March 2002

Research carried out by:

Julia Dinsdale

Collaborative
Widening
Participation
Project

Funded by:



**Worcestershire
Lifelong Learning
Partnership**



**Herefordshire
Lifelong Learning
Partnership**

Further copies available from:

**Julia Dinsdale
Worcester Project Officer
University College Worcester
Henwick Grove
St Johns
Worcester
WR2 6AJ**

**Phone: 01905 855554
Email: j.dinsdale@worc.ac.uk**

Also available on www.worc.ac.uk/wp

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Acknowledgements

The second Community Voice has again been an enjoyable piece of work, increasing my knowledge of Worcestershire and introducing me to Herefordshire. I would like to thank all those who took part and who organized groups for me. Thanks to April, my administrator for her patience and persistence and to all of those who have proof-read for me.



Contents

Introduction and Review of Last Year's Community Voice

5-6

The Research

7

How Do People Hear About Courses?

8

Why Do People Join Classes?

9-10

Where Classes Are

10-12

The Cost

12

Childcare

12

Timing

13

What Keeps People Coming To The Course

14

Other Factors

14-15

Moving On

15-17

Conclusions and Recommendations

Publicity

19

Guidance

19-20

What Do People Want?

20

Attracting and Supporting People

20

The Venue

20

Transport

21

Childcare

21

Cost

21

Employees

21

Tutors

21

Other

21

Moving On

22

Funding

22

Final Notes

23

Introduction and Review of Last Year's Community Voice

This is the second Community Voice, an expanded version to include Herefordshire as well as Worcestershire. Before discussing this year's research I want, briefly, to set out the action that has flowed from last year's edition.

Community Voice is meant to be a piece of action research, which gives a voice to people who have either been excluded from education as adults or are just beginning to re-engage with education. They give their time to discuss these issues in the belief that it will help make changes, which will improve the systems for them.

As a researcher engaged in this process I take achieving action seriously. Six hundred copies of Community Voice were distributed from March 2001 to January 2002 and it has been available on the website www.worc.ac.uk/wp as well. I have also been asked to run two national workshops, one in London, one in Leicester on Listening to Learners, based on the experience of Community Voice. I have presented the work locally and nationally at conferences and it has been picked up by other Lifelong Learning partnerships including Shropshire and Staffordshire. An article based on Community Voice appeared in the October 2001 edition of Adults Learning.

I am not in a position to know how fully the research has influenced developments, nor can the research claim full credit for developments, which seem to have stemmed from it. However, some of the following developments seem to be linked.

Last year's research indicated the need for more people working at a very local level to guide, advise and encourage people into appropriate education.

The Collaborative Widening Participation Project (Coventry University, University College Worcester, The University of Warwick) has funded two workers in local communities to carry out this work. This model has been picked up by several Lifelong Learning networks who have successfully bid to the partnerships and the Learning and Skills Council for their own local workers.

This work has been supported by the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) network, which has provided training in IAG for some of the workers concerned. The IAG have also recognised the need for guidance for adults and have successfully bid for four guidance workers for the two counties, one to work with people with learning difficulties.

University College Worcester has also recognised the need to have impartial guidance on Higher Education available and have successfully submitted a joint bid to the Collaborative Widening Participation Project and Learning and Skills Council for a worker.

The use of local venues has continued to increase and the Community Voice research was used with quantitative research to help prove the case for a new local community learning centre.

Formal education providers seem to be more aware of the need to provide what last year's research described as 'a helping hand' into college. There are more outreach workers around in the community representing colleges and programmes of transition are being discussed. For example, University College Worcester is providing a long induction period to allow students moving into Higher Education a greater chance to familiarize themselves with the institution and to gain the necessary skills to achieve success.

Progression or the lack of opportunities to progress was another conclusion of last year's Community Voice. The Worcestershire Lifelong Learning Partnership established an ICT strategy group to bring together all providers to ensure closer working on progression. In some cases this has resulted in a basic plus course following the ten-week introductory IT courses.

It is obvious from this year's research that some of the conclusions need more work. There is still a lack of childcare for courses in the community, mainly because funding is not being made available to fully support these courses. There is still a need for better training and support for tutors working in community venues. Transport continues to be a problem where students need to move on or live in isolated areas.

These are the developments that I am aware of; I would be interested to hear of others. Although there are new findings in this year's research a lot of it echoes last year's, so there is no room for complacency.

Last year's Community Voice also made some recommendations; one was to ensure feedback to participants. This has been done in an ad hoc way, but we will circulate this document to as many participants as we can to help the process.

In an attempt to reach a wider range of participants it was agreed to train some researchers to work on Community Voice. Two groups were trained during this year providing a wider representation among the researchers. Some of them have contributed to this issue.

This year, with work on the development of networking and the new researcher base, we have been able to involve more non-learners; low paid employees and people from minority groups.

The Research

This year's Community Voice covers two counties: Worcestershire and Herefordshire. The research has been organised in the same way as last year's, with one-off focus groups forming the bulk of the research backed up with some questionnaires, surveys and individual interviews.

It was decided to continue with the focus groups as being the most appropriate way of reaching a variety of people from the widening participation groups. The groups have been brought together through existing networks and groupings. Twenty-eight groups have been held with approximately two hundred people taking part.

The groups have taken place in a variety of venues and the people who participated came from a range of backgrounds. We have attempted to include some non-learners, offering payment to bring groups together, and to talk to people who are in low paid employment. We have worked hard to involve people from minority groups, and have used local networks and offered researchers trained by the project to facilitate this.

Each group meets for about an hour, less if it is part of a class. All participants are given the chance to approve the notes of the meetings prior to 'publication'. The groups follow similar patterns for the discussion, but there are no set questions and often the unexpected comments that flow from the discussion are the most enlightening, and lead to exciting possibilities. This is my reason for continuing to use focus groups instead of questionnaires.

Meeting the groups has again been enjoyable and I've learnt a lot. I also had the strange experience of delivering a workshop, based on last year's Community Voice in London, to find myself, a Londoner, talking about Parish Magazines and the difficulties of rural life! It is my immersion in the Community Voice research that has allowed me to feel comfortable and has added depth to my work in widening participation.

The people I've met have again been a rich mix with potential, needing a flexible approach and a voice to encourage providers to re-think provision, which will allow them to realize that potential.

This year's Community Voice will follow a similar format; reflecting peoples' experience of education with their offered solutions and in one case a wish list. In response to readers' comments, where appropriate, I have mentioned groups by age, gender, habitat and race. Hopefully, this will enable providers to respond appropriately to these groups. As promised, I will draw together some conclusions and make recommendations for action.

For the majority of people it continues to be word of mouth. Generally from friends, family or a trusted person working in the community or place of employment. Some interesting additions this year included:

- *The lady who came round to talk to me about my cats.*
- *The tutor's mum who is very active in the village.*
- *The lady who does the hall letting.*

Several people mentioned other agencies they worked with outside of education including Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and people giving advice on disability. Where people were using local community centres for childcare, luncheon clubs for advice, then it sometimes followed that they would see notices or ask people about courses at the Centre.

One group had heard via their children's school who had sent a welcoming letter home with the children for a course in the school. The Parish Magazine is also another vehicle for advertising. Six hundred copies were distributed in one village and was well read. The local paper, particularly 'freebies' were also popular places to look for courses.

There were several mentions of 'bite-size' an initiative supported by the Learning and Skills Council, which ran in July 2001. This provided a good introduction to courses and had given people a chance to ask questions about possibilities. It seems to have been most successful where it was part of an existing network, such as at established community centres or held at a village hall. Similarly, joining up with events such as 'fun days' or garden parties that happen regularly can be useful.

Some community learning organizations go out and talk to other agencies and groups about what is happening in education and this is useful in spreading understanding and knowledge.

One college 'blitzes' the village with information for five weeks prior to a course arriving and rings students to talk to them about the course.

College prospectuses are too big and only come out once a year so weren't considered particularly useful. Separate flyers about particular courses were considered more useful, particularly if put through your door. Although a lot of people said it would go straight in the bin, some said if it grabbed them they might follow up on it. It wouldn't be enough on its own to get them to a class. A couple of people mentioned 'cold calling' initiatives, with people knocking on doors asking about the sorts of courses they wanted. But they had not heard anything since, so felt it was a bit of a waste of time.

Unless the course had been recommended by someone they trusted, most people wanted an opportunity to ask about the course before they went along. One group produced the following useful checklist:-

- ✓ The workload and hours
- ✓ Childcare arrangements
- ✓ What additional support was available
- ✓ Some contact with the tutor
- ✓ Possible online support
- ✓ Accreditation
- ✓ What would follow on after the course
- ✓ Encouragement to do the course.

Generally this type of guidance is not easily accessible. Some people had tried careers, but felt that unless you were clear about what you wanted to do they weren't much help.

Where people have received good impartial guidance, they have appreciated it. One college had taken the trouble to find out where else they did the course nearer to the enquirer's home. She had in turn recommended their service to others.

Why Do People Join Classes?

A lot of the students I spoke to were doing IT courses and for many of them it was about keeping up with children/grandchildren or about the future.

- *Being dragged screaming into 21st century.*
- *To prove to my son that I don't have one foot in the grave.*
- *I bought one and didn't know how to use it.*

Very few people mentioned it as a way of getting work, although several were doing the course to support their voluntary work, some people who were on their second or third IT course were beginning to see it as a possible way of earning their living.

One college was running very targeted courses such as farm accounts. This meant that the students were working towards specific goals. These were popular as people felt that they would not have to learn things that they didn't want.

Older people were particularly interested in learning how to use the internet, particularly to stay in contact with their children via the email. Some wanted to be able to shop online and one person mentioned that as she got less mobile the computer would become more important as a means of communication for her. Unfortunately, I didn't see many courses in the community that provided networking to allow this access and in some cases it seemed as if people were following courses that weren't particularly what they wanted, such as databases and desk top publishing because their first choice wasn't available.

Several courses I visited were basic/key skills courses and people had come because they had missed out at school through illness or bullying. People who had left school early were beginning to notice that they couldn't get jobs without qualifications or couldn't now pass the driving test without being able to read and write:

- *If you can't read or write, you've got no choices.*

Many people talked about the social side of courses. Meeting other people and breaking down isolation was particularly important for young parents with children and older people. For some people this was the over-riding motivation for joining a class, it really didn't matter what the subject was.

Many women with young children said it was good to get out and discover yourself:

- *I want to be a person not just someone's mum, you get trapped.*
- *To talk to other adults.*

Several disabled adults talked about the importance of socializing and not becoming isolated.

People in employment wanted courses to support their jobs, but they wanted to be consulted on what they needed. One example was in catering.

- *A chance to learn different ethnic ways of cooking, plus an understanding of the culture and a bit of language would make me better at my job.*

Where people were working in large institutions or companies they often felt that all the staff development was aimed at middle and upper sectors and although they might be offered opportunities to participate, it wasn't what they wanted or at an appropriate time.

Other groups who had not joined courses identified barriers that had stopped them. For some Asian women this included: lack of role models; fear of becoming 'westernised' and the tension between home and education.

- *(The family) fear that you are being westernised and that you are rebelling.*
- *I went to college for six months behind my family's back, but had to drop out.*

Where Classes Are

The twenty-eight groups I visited were in a variety of venues across the two counties. Many were in village halls, some in community centres, family centres, churches and schools, one in a warden-supervised estate, others at places of employment. Not all were meeting specifically for courses, but all had an interest in education or learning in some way.

When I asked those who were part of a class what had attracted them to the course the top of everyone's list was the local venue.

- *It's very local, most of us walk or bike here.*
- *It had to be local to let me come in the evening after work.*
- *We feel more at ease locally – it's a bit like a family.*
- *We come straight from work, we are knackered and we won't travel very far.*
- *Getting to any other class outside the village would be impossible, if you didn't have your own car.*

The inclusion of Herefordshire in this year's CommunityVoice has highlighted the importance of local venues. Travelling around is impossible in some rural areas without a car, but it isn't just rural areas. Several young mums pointed out that to get across Hereford City with a buggy and two kids to get to college by bus is not only expensive, but can be very difficult. Worcester City was described as 'scary' at night and the bus station often deserted of buses and people. Some people felt that the bus services were not safe.

Younger disabled people welcomed the possibility of travelling if they could; it expanded their horizons and increased their independence. Often they needed help at first, but valued the experience greatly.

Transport is not the only thing that makes local venues attractive, knowing people is also important. A lot of people came with someone else and liked the idea that they would know other people. One group said it was important that people shared an interest and experience, for example, in agriculture or rural life.

Another factor which emerged more strongly this year was the commitment to making the local village hall work for the community. Several groups mentioned that they had been involved in fund raising and supporting the building of a new or renovated village hall.

- *The village hall needs using now it has been renovated with lottery money.*
- *It's very comfortable here a lovely venue – we need to use it.*

People who meet in community centres described them as:

- *Friendly and homely – good environment in which to learn.*
- *The centre has a relaxed atmosphere.*

One group working on basic skills met in a church, which they described as 'private'.

- *People don't know why we come here. There is still a lot of stigma about not being able to read and write.*
- *It's a relief that there isn't a sign on the door saying 'Literacy Project'.*

Some people in work would like courses delivered at their place of work, not just in-service training, but leisure courses, this would make them more accessible and would also build up a better working atmosphere.

- *Make you feel part of a community and maybe make you a better worker.*

Several disabled people pointed out that buildings are often not fully accessible or disabled access is round the back or down side alleyways making them feel like second class citizens. The majority of new village and community halls have addressed these accessibility problems making them ideal venues.

The Cost

The majority of courses I visited were being offered free, particularly those that were billed as introductory. For most people this was vital and they would not have been able to come if there was a fee.

Some people felt that all community education should be free. Others were willing to pay a 'reasonable amount' based on their ability to pay, but added that it would have to be paid in realistic chunks and not all up front. Only one person said that everybody should pay to attract the right sort of people.

Several people pointed out that there are hidden costs, which are not visible when you start the course, for example, materials, transport and childcare. Although help was sometimes available for these things it was hard to find out what was available and where you got it from. Often you had to claim after you had paid it, which is not possible on a restricted budget.

Several groups were using ILAs (Individual Learning Accounts) and could not have done the course without them. One group, who were in low paid employment, had used them to secure a training course for themselves as their employer was not willing to pay. It was generally not something people knew about or had been given clear information about.

Childcare

Sadly the majority of courses in the community are not providing childcare, so excluding a lot of people. This is particularly true of IT courses in the community. Some students made the point that they knew of young parents who wanted to come on courses but could not.

Where childcare is provided there is active take-up and the childcare provision is often the reason why learners get involved in the first place. One group described it as the most important factor in deciding to attend courses at the centre.

For all parents it is important who looks after their children. For some groups cultural pressures make it even more important to carefully think through crèche provision to support learning. One Asian woman said:

- ***Childcare is important as family have to look after the children - you can't just leave them with anyone.***

There is not enough childcare available and it needs to be flexible. Several groups felt that childcare should be available for evening courses, particularly for single parents and those in work. Many people who have partners and can leave their children choose to do evening courses, but comment that this is often hard work after a day with the children.

Several people who had begun to progress through the system and were taking vocational courses made the point that childcare was covered for courses, but not for work experience, so it meant they weren't able to fully complete the course.

Timing

When the course is run, both the time of day and time of year as well as the length of it are important. Most people who are starting out want courses to be a manageable length.

- *Ten weeks didn't seem too long, you could take a risk.*
- *The length of the courses was not too long, although now it seems too short and we are all going to sign up for the follow on. (Was a common rider).*

The time of day was also important; generally the daytime was preferred. Obviously those in work need evening time, but often commented that it was unlikely that they would make it anyway unless it was on the doorstep or they could come straight from work. Parents liked the idea of being able to fit it around school times, dropping children off and going straight to class was popular. Shift workers often miss out on courses.

Those in employment often found themselves excluded because of the timing of courses particularly if they are on shift work.

- *I can't go during the day, my shift finishes at 4pm. I'd like to go straight from work, rather than waiting around until evening courses start at 7.30!*

Older learners need shorter, more frequent courses.

- *Half an hour a day of exercise would be great rather than two hours once a week.*

Another group connected with farming welcomed a whole day over a five-week period because:

- *It fits in with the farming duties and gives us time to problem solve and play with ideas.*

It was clear that the time of the year varied with the needs of the group. If you are engaged in farming the best time to come to courses is November to February, they therefore find themselves excluded from courses at most colleges. Older students commented that they welcomed courses in the winter, particularly in local venues, it gave them something to do, whereas in the summer it was easier to get out and about and some people mentioned that gardening was a summer occupation and they didn't want to come to courses then. Younger parents said that getting children out in the winter was harder so preferred courses in the summer.

What Keeps People Coming To The Course

The tutor was the single most important factor in retaining students and making the course worthwhile. The best tutors are described as friendly, informal, but professional. They must know their subject, but be able to teach properly in a way that creates a relaxed atmosphere so that people don't feel stupid and can ask silly questions.

- *They need to be of a high standard if you want to encourage people to come back again.*

People identified very quickly if the tutor 'enjoyed' teaching in the community. Some had experienced tutors who had talked down to them or not been interested in beginners. These examples had generally been in colleges and many felt that you had to be 'special' to teach in the community.

There is an obvious lack of good community tutors in all subjects and some groups said they had asked for courses, but suitable tutors aren't available. One village described by residents as 'learning hungry', was swamped with people wanting to learn, but couldn't find suitable tutors or secure regular funding.

Many tutors are working overtime for no pay and putting a great deal into situations, supporting students through the first difficult stages of returning to learn.

It was encouraging to meet tutors teaching in pairs from one college. Students really appreciated this.

- *They are able to service individual needs as well as delivering the planned session.*

The tutors also welcomed the support this provided, tutors are often teaching in unknown, isolated venues without the security and contact provided by a college building.

- *If the laptop won't work,..... usually knows how to fix it, and I have other skills I can contribute.*

Many people noted that it was easier with tutors who shared age and interests. Some older students preferred older tutors, although this wasn't a blanket response. Certainly those engaged in farming liked the idea that the tutors had some farming knowledge, so could tailor the courses to their needs. For Asian women it was vital that tutors understood their particular needs; for example, a swimming class had been arranged at a time when they could use the pool for a women only session, but the lifeguards were male so they couldn't go.

Other Factors

Most of the other things that kept people coming was the atmosphere created by the tutors, such as, encouraging the group to support one another and to share ideas and problems.

- *Nice to know that when you find something difficult, no-one else can do it either.*

People often commented on the growth in their confidence after the course, and this had usually been because the tutor had made it accessible and given time to go through problems and reinforce learning.

The size of the class was also important; many people felt that the smaller groups helped learning. About eight seemed an optimum number. This allowed for individual attention and getting to know one another. Tutors were able to give specialized guidance and advice with this number. For example, in many IT courses, people have previously had access to different types of computers or programmes and they need to be able to transfer the skills they have learnt in class.

Moving On

As indicated above, when people signed up for the ten-week course they hadn't anticipated that they would want to carry on. For many people it was the beginning of something.

● *I caught the learning bug.*

Many felt frustrated that carrying on with courses wasn't easy. Each new ten-week course required a new funding application or the laptops were moved to another community venue and you were left without anything.

● *We are constantly looking for continuation funding so that courses don't stop and start, leaving people feeling frustrated. Each funding agency has different criteria, so it makes it difficult to provide good progression.*

● *I don't understand about funding really, but each time we need funding my tutor has to take time out from class to make the application, why can't we have proper funding like colleges do?*

The majority of people aren't ready to move on to college and don't want to make huge steps.

● *We want to get knowledge quietly.*

Most want reinforcement and time to practice and build on their knowledge.

A lot of people aren't interested in qualifications, but those who are know that it is likely to mean going off to college, which isn't generally seen as a welcome prospect. They also find it difficult to get information and guidance about what is the best course for them. They will ask their tutor or the person at the centre, who will generally not have the full information with which to offer appropriate guidance.

● *It wasn't until I got to the college that I found out what I could do and get.*

- *If you don't ask for financial help you don't get it.*
- *There are limited places and they don't advertise. I didn't find out that I could get help with childcare and books until afterwards.*

Many people wanted to get off benefits and into jobs but found this extremely difficult without qualifications, but getting qualifications with children was often too difficult.

- *I worked before and did a job training, which my employers paid for, but I can't do that now I have children.*
- *I am looking for something where you train while in the job. They only seem to provide this for certain age groups, 18-24 I think?*

Earning money is a strong reason not to engage in education although people recognise this as a short term.

- *Jobs are easy to get and I wasn't thinking about the future.*
- *I need to prioritise what is important now rather than later; work gives you a wage now. You have to think long term.*

Many young people experience pressure to earn money quickly and this is a matter of survival for other people. There is still a belief that if you are woman:

- *You will end up looking after the kids anyway, so why get an education.*

Peer group pressure is also a reality for young people.

- *You need money to buy fashion – you represent society and you could get labelled if you don't.*

Some people thought there was too much emphasis on qualifications and didn't understand what all the different qualifications were for anyway. Some qualifications are seen as ridiculous an 'NVQ in pointing' was one example. They keep changing and you are not sure how they match up. Many people lead full and valuable lives without qualifications, but they are not valued by lots of people because they don't have qualifications.

- *I feel I am gifted to have managed all my life without being able to read and write, I don't feel my life has been wasted.*

For this person moving on to begin learning to read and write has been a significant step, as important as gaining qualifications. As providers we need to recognise the value of all students and potential students and work to ensure equality of access, funding and sustainability of provision for all students, whatever level.

Before I present my conclusions drawn from the research, I thought it would be useful to produce one group's dream community learning centre. It presents a clear summary of what people are looking for from education.

If you had a new local learning centre what would it be like?

- ✓ It would be friendly and welcoming, informal but professional!
- ✓ Bureaucracy would be kept to a minimum (no forms to fill!).
- ✓ Courses tailor made.
- ✓ A variety of courses to include vocational, leisure and particular interests.
- ✓ At all levels from basic to degree - to allow good progression.
- ✓ Flexible delivery so that you could have courses repeated, e.g., the same class at a different time in the week to allow people to attend regularly and to get reinforcement. You could take as long as you liked over each course.
- ✓ Taster courses provided.
- ✓ The environment and setting should be flexible and comfortable.
- ✓ A place where you can ask stupid questions.
- ✓ Staffing is vital – good range of staff skills, paid reasonably, who know how to work with people.
- ✓ Provision for all ages and maximum use of the centre. To include parent and children groups, groups for young people, older learners.
- ✓ Good connections established with other local agencies to avoid duplication, e.g., school, leisure centre etc.
- ✓ High level of crèche support.
- ✓ Money for transport to allow full use of all local facilities.
- ✓ Links made with local business to encourage employment opportunities.
- ✓ Establish good local communications so that the centre reflected what people wanted.
- ✓ Provision of good internet with homework links.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Publicity

- Word of mouth is how people hear about courses. This means engagement with community and workplace networks, supporting people in these networks with information, which is realistic and updated.
- It means encouraging people who have already done courses to spread the word and maybe 'bring a friend'.
- Some groups want the encouragement of role models; people from their own community to talk to about what it is like to learn.
- Putting up notices does work if they are put in places where people go for example, rent offices, schools, local centres, supermarkets. They are not enough on their own, and they need to be backed up with personal contact.
- People suggested local papers, especially freebies and parish magazines.
- College prospectuses were thought to be too big and only come out once a year. If they are to be of any use they need to be broken down to target certain groups (older people, people with children, day, evening etc) and to be produced more regularly.
- Taster events are a useful way of getting to know about courses, particularly where tied to community events.

Guidance

- This must be seen as an integral part of the publicity procedure, without it the paper is useless.
- Guidance must be available quickly to capture people's enthusiasm. As some people pointed out it takes courage to make the first move, if there is a waiting time then courage seeps away.
- People want guidance on more than one occasion as they need reassurance and second opinions.

- Numerical target setting for guidance makes no sense for widening participation groups as it doesn't allow for the time needed to provide the encouragement and assurance.

What do People Want?

- This research clearly shows that people cannot answer this question without good guidance. Many do not know what is available and what it entails. People may have an idea of what they would like to do but are not sure what is involved. Where it's work related they want to know the best pathways and to understand the qualifications.
- Courses need to be tailor made to suit diverse needs. This will be achieved through careful, regular negotiations at a very local level around courses to include all the support issues, timing, level and if appropriate progression. If this is done the course is likely to recruit more successfully.
- If the tutor can be paid to be part of the negotiation then this also allows the students to be reassured around their decision.
- For certain groups the negotiation needs to be with family and community as well as the learner to ensure a clear understanding and that support is available.
- There is a need for more local needs analysis carried out with good guidance and negotiation, which is used to inform the providers of appropriate courses.

Attracting and Supporting People

The Venue

- Clearly the most important element in attracting people to courses is the locality – the need for courses to be held locally.
- There is growing recognition that community learning centres will be needed in a variety of settings and the large college building will need to be decentralised.
- Community venues need support and funding in the same way as colleges do and should not be expected to operate as learning centres without this support. This requires a review of how funding is allocated.
- Learning in the workplace, not just on-job training, but leisure courses would also be welcomed.

Transport

- A key factor. Providers need to work more closely with transport providers, either fitting courses to timetables or in influencing the provision of adequate and safe transport to places of learning.

Childcare

- There should be childcare available for all courses in community settings.
- Childcare should be extended to evening courses where appropriate.
- On vocational courses childcare should cover work experience.

Cost

- Courses should be free or a negotiated fee payable in small chunks.
- All costs other than the fee should be transparent.

Employees

- Employers should provide on-job training in work time.
- Provision of leisure courses to be considered.

Tutors

- Tutors should be supported and trained to work in the community.
- More suitable tutors need to be recruited and trained urgently.

Other

- Class size should be carefully regulated to allow maximum learning opportunities not to maximise funding opportunities.
- All buildings used for learning should be fully accessible.

Moving On

- People do not want to move away, although they do want to move on. Provision of all levels of education at a local level is what is required.
- Better communication between providers is essential so that those who are ready to move on, and away know how to.
- Collaboration between providers on supply of courses in areas so that duplication is avoided and 'cold spots' are not created.

Funding

- Moving on is often hampered by funding. Each ten-week block has to be applied for separately, often meaning breaks in learning, which in turn means losing learners. There is a need for a system which allows for regular, consistent funding. This funding needs to recognise the 'specialness' of working in the community and should reflect the extra costs involved and should not be tied to unrealistic numerical targets.
- The criteria of each funder is different, which is frustrating and causes delay. Clearer working between funders would be helpful.

Final Notes

This will be the last Community Voice from this source. If you read last year's Community Voice you will know that much of what I have found out is not new and repeats itself. This will continue to be the case. I believe its now time for action. Participants have been very generous with their time, but now need people to listen and act.

All education providers, whether public or private, need to listen to learners; focus groups are one way of doing it, there are others, I recommend Mark Ravenhall's Listening to Learners book produced by NIACE and Learning Skills Development Agencies 2001. People are already doing some of it, often for quality assurance purposes, but so often it ends up filed away and not acted on.

I have agreed with the two Lifelong Learning Partnerships to offer training/workshops on how to listen to learners and maximise the research, for the benefit of those people who have so far been excluded from education as an adult.

To finish I would like to borrow some words from a recent article on Basic Skills (Lavender/Taylor, Adults Learning, January 2002). We should be "*Dreaming we need the capacity to think outside the box, to be creative and to take a 'measured risk,'*" then we will attract those people who have so far been excluded, and who this research has tried to give a voice.



COVENTRY
UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE WORCESTER



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK